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The Impact of *Salafism* on Socio-Religious and Political Shifts in Kenya

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Abstract

Global discourse on *Salafism* is often dominated by narratives of radicalism and extremism, particularly within the framework of security concerns. Such portrayals, however, obscure the diverse expressions of *Salafi* thought and practice, especially among women. This study examines the socio-religious and political engagement of *Salafi* Muslim women in Kenya, using the Maahad Girls' Training Institute (Maahad GTI) as a case study. It investigates how these women navigate religious identity within a patriarchal context, challenge conventional gender norms, and influence both religious and secular spaces through education, community initiatives, and civic participation. Guided by Saba Mahmood's (2005) concept of pious agency, the research demonstrates how graduates of Maahad GTI employ religious knowledge as a means of empowerment, ethical responsibility, and social transformation. The analysis further highlights the role of digital platforms in amplifying their voices and expanding their influence. Findings reveal a transformative model of *Salafism* rooted in moral integrity and civic responsibility, offering an alternative to dominant narratives of militancy. By focusing on women's agency, this paper calls for a nuanced understanding of *Salafism* in Kenya and underscores the necessity of incorporating female perspectives in the study of Muslim socio-political movements.

Keywords: *Salafism*, Muslim Women, Political Agency, Islam, Kenya

1. Introduction

Contemporary interpretations of Islam span a broad spectrum of theological, social, and political views, with no universally recognized authority or single orthodoxy. This diversity of interpretation has allowed for the emergence of revivalist and reformist movements whose central aim is to restore

Muslim life to the foundational teachings of Islam.[1] Such movements seek to reconnect with the formative era of Islamic revelation, employing varied strategies to recreate the moral and social order of the early Muslim community. Their initiatives have influenced not only religious thought but also the cultural and political landscapes in which Muslims live. While they differ in methodology, some advocating incremental reform and others calling for immediate transformation, they share several defining features.[2] As Metcalf observes, revivalist scholars emerge during socio-political distress, interpreting challenges through a religious lens, focusing on Islam as a guide to life. They attribute societal decline to moral degradation and adopt a "scripturalist" methodology, prioritizing the Qur'an and *Sunnah* over unorthodox practices. Figures like *mujaddid* (renewer) or *mahdi* (rightly guided one), inspire a return to foundational principles.[3] Kamari situates that Islamic revivalism originated in 632 A.D., following the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and political resistance against the first caliph.[4]

By the ninth century, demographic shifts, socio-economic change, and political developments had given rise to *madhhabs* (schools of Islamic jurisprudence). The Hanafi school, for example, influenced currents of thought that later contributed to the emergence of *Salafi* ideology. The term *Salafi* is derived from *al-salaf al-salih* the "pious predecessors" of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) a group comprising the *Sahaba* (companions), the *Tabi'in* (successors), and the *Tabi'al-Tabi'in* (successors of successors).[5] According to Mohie-Eldin, this formative period began with the Prophet's first revelation and ended with the death of Ahmad ibn Hanbal in 855 C.E.[6] As a revivalist movement, *Salafism* crystallized in Arabia during the 13th and again in the 18th centuries, drawing intellectual and theological inspiration from Ibn Taymiyyah and later Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Ibn Taymiyyah and his disciples such as Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, al-Dhahabi, and Ibn Kathir advocated ijtihad (independent reasoning) over *taqlid* (blind adherence), emphasizing strict adherence to the Qur'an and hadith while critically engaging with the views of earlier scholars.[7] The movement's core objective was to preserve the authenticity of Islam, eliminating perceived *bid'ah* (innovations) and constructing a framework for guiding future generations.

In Africa, *Salafism* has adapted to a variety of local contexts, resulting in distinctive regional expressions. Østebø describes "African *Salafism*" as the intersection of global *Salafi* ideals with African socio-cultural realities neither entirely foreign nor wholly indigenous.[8] These expressions are sustained through trans local religious networks and are shaped by local social fabrics. Salafism's reformist and renewal agenda has made it appealing to African Muslims, offering fresh perspectives on faith, politics, and society.[9] In some contexts, its emphasis on moral and social reform has catalysed significant political mobilization, as documented in West, North, and Sub-Saharan Africa.[10] In Kenya,

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1 Hasan Basmisirli. "The Contribution of Salafi Doctrine for the Radicalisation of Muslims in Europe: An Ideological Approach to Radicalisation through Content Analysis and the Effects of Salafi Institutionalization in Europe." (Graduate Thesis, KADİR HAS UNIVERSITY, 2017), 18.

2 Barbara. D. Metcalf. *Islamic Revival in British India: Deobandi, 1860-1900.* (Princeton University Press,1982), 2.

3 Metcalf. *Islamic Revival in British India: Deobandi, 1860-1900*, 5-6.

4 Clarke, M. Kamari. *Local Practices, Global Controversies: Islam in Sub-Saharan African Contexts.* (The Macmillan Center, 2005), 27.

5 Jacob, Olidort. "The Politics of 'Quietist' Salafism". *The Brookings Project on U.S Relations with the Islamic World.* Analysis paper no.18. Feb,2015.

6 Fatima, Mohie-Eldin. "The Evolution of Salafism: A History of Salafi Doctrine." Al-Noor. *Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies Journal.* Volume 9, Issue 1, (2015):44.

7 Mohie-Eldin. "*The Evolution of Salafism,*" 45.

8 Østebø, Terje. "African Salafism: Religious Purity and the Politicization of Purity", *Islamic Africa* **6, 1-2 (2015):** 6.

9 Østebø. "African Salafism," 8.

10 Abdoulaye Sounaye. *Salafi revolution in West Africa.* (ZMO Working Papers, 19, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, 2017), 2.

where Muslims constitute approximately 11% of a predominantly Christian population and represent diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, *Salafism* functions both as a religious revivalist current and a contested socio-political force. Scholarship on *Salafism* in Kenya has often been dominated by security-focused narratives linking the movement to radicalization and violent extremism. While such concerns are not without foundation, this framing overlooks the internal diversity of *Salafism* and neglects the active contributions of women within the movement.

This paper addresses that gap by examining the role of *Salafi* Muslim women in shaping Kenya's socio-religious and political landscape. It focuses on the Maahad Girls' Training Institute (Maahad GTI) as a case study to explore how women trained in a *Salafi* framework navigate religious identity, engage in civic life, and challenge restrictive gender norms. The analysis is grounded in Saba Mahmood's concept of *pious agency*, which highlights how religiously committed women exercise agency within traditional frameworks,[11]and Richard A. Nielsen's research on female authority in patriarchal religious movements.[12] Additionally, Ng'ayo's notion of "Islamic feminism" is applied to understand how *Salafi* women in Kenya leverage religious education and community engagement to promote empowerment and counter exclusionary narratives.[13] By situating Kenyan *Salafism* within its broader historical, theological, and African contexts, this paper reframes the movement as a dynamic socio-religious phenomenon that cannot be understood solely through the lens of militancy. Instead, it foregrounds the agency of *Salafi* women as educators, community leaders, and political actors, contributing to an enriched understanding of Islamic revivalism in contemporary East Africa.

2. Literature Review

The study of *Salafism* as a transnational Islamic revivalist movement necessitates an understanding of its historical roots, global manifestations, and localized adaptations. Globally, *Salafism* traces its ideological origins to the notion of *al-salaf al-salih* (the pious predecessors) comprising the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), his *sahaba* (companions), *tabi'in* (their successors), and the *tabi' al-tabi'in* (successors of the successors). This period, which according to Mohie-Eldin spans from the first revelation to the death of Ahmad ibn Hanbal around 855 C.E., is regarded as a golden age of Islamic authenticity and orthodoxy.[14] Over centuries, *Salafism* has evolved through theological, political, and socio-cultural reinterpretations, shaped by figures such as Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and later Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who emphasized scriptural literalism, rejection of innovations (*bid'a*), and a return to the Qur'an and Sunnah as the exclusive sources of guidance.[15]

Contemporary scholarship links *Salafism* to global Islamic revivalist movements, which differ significantly in approach, strategy and political engagement, despite their call to revive an idealized Islamic past. Hasan Basmisirli underscores that modern Islamic movements, including *Salafi* currents, emerge in part as responses to perceived moral decline and socio-political marginalization.[16] Barbara

[11] Saba Mahmood. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
[12] Richard, A. Nielsen. "Women's Authority in Patriarchal Social Movements: The Case of Female Salafi Preachers". *American Journal of Political Science*, *64*(1), 2020, 52–66.
[13] Rickline, S. Ng'ayo. "Islamic Feminism as an Alternative Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism among Muslim Women in Kenya." *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s1), (2023): 150.
[14] Mohie-Eldin. "The Evolution of Salafism: A History of Salafi Doctrine." 44.
[15] Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah. *Majmu'al-Fatawa*. (Riyadh: Dar al- 'Alamiyyah, 1995).
[16] Hasan Basmisirli. "The Contribution of Salafi Doctrine for the Radicalisation of Muslims in Europe: An Ideological Approach to Radicalisation through Content Analysis and the Effects of Salafi Institutionalization in Europe." (Graduate Thesis, KADİR HAS UNIVERSITY, 2017).

Metcalf identifies common characteristics among revivalist scholars, including the interpretation of contemporary crises through a religious lens and the prioritization of moral reform as a prerequisite for societal renewal.[17] Yet, the absence of a single orthodoxy within the contemporary Islamic world has led to divergent forms of *Salafism*: quietist variants that prioritize personal piety and doctrinal purity, politico-activist strains that seek systemic reform through political participation, and jihadist factions that endorse armed struggle.[18] This ideological diversity illustrates the adaptability of *Salafism* to varied socio-political environments.

In Africa, *Salafism* has been reframed through the lens of local cultural, political, and religious realities. Østebø introduces the concept of "African *Salafism*" to describe how global *Salafi* discourses interact with local traditions, producing hybrid forms that are neither wholly foreign nor entirely indigenous.[19] In regions such as West Africa, the movement has capitalized on its reformist rhetoric to attract followers by promising religious authenticity, socio-political renewal, and moral clarity. Abdoulaye Sounaye notes that such appeals often intersect with broader social transformations, contributing to shifts in political participation, gender relations, and religious authority structures.[20] However, these transformations are not uniform; African *Salafism* remains contextually contingent, shaped by historical patterns of Islamic scholarship, colonial legacies, and the contemporary geopolitics of the Muslim world.

In the Kenyan context, *Salafism* occupies a distinctive position within a religiously plural society in which Muslims constitute approximately 11% of the population and are far from homogeneous.[21] Kenyan Muslim communities are shaped by diverse ethnic, cultural, and doctrinal traditions, including *Sunni*, *Shia*, *Sufi*, and other Islamic expressions. The coastal region, historically influenced by Swahili-Arab culture and trade networks, has long been a centre of Islamic scholarship, yet recent decades have witnessed the growing influence of *Salafi* teachings often introduced through transnational networks, Gulf-based funding, and religious education programs. This has occasionally produced tensions between *Salafi* reformists and proponents of *Sufi* traditions, who view the former as dismissive of established local religious practices. *Salafism* in Kenya has also intersected with issues of governance, security, and social cohesion. The post-9/11 global security discourse, counterterrorism initiatives, and the securitization of Islam in the Horn of Africa have brought *Salafi* communities under heightened scrutiny. While extremist actors have exploited certain *Salafi* narratives, research by Richard Nielsen emphasizes that many *Salafi* leaders, including women, engage in community-building and moral education within non-violent frameworks.[22] Saba Mahmood's theoretical framework on women's piety movements is especially relevant here, as it challenges Western secular-liberal assumptions by foregrounding Muslim women's agency within conservative religious movements.[23] Ng'ayo extends this argument by proposing "Islamic feminism" as a framework for understanding how Kenyan Muslim women, including those influenced by *Salafi*

[17] Barbara Metcalf. "Living Hadith in the Tablighi Jama'at." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 52(3) (1993): 584–608.

[18] Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 29, no. 3 (2006): 215, https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100500497004.

[19] Østebø, T. "African Salafism: Religious Purity and the Politics of Tradition." *Islamic Africa*, 6(1-2) (2015): 6.

[20] Sounaye, A. "The Making of Salafi Publics in Niger." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 36(1) (2016): 46–61.

[21] Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS). *Kenya Population and Housing Census*. (Nairobi: KNBS, 2019).

[22] Richard Nielsen. *Deadly Clerics: Blocked Ambition and the Path to Jihad*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[23] Saba Mahmood. Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject: Some Reflections on the Islamic Revival in Egypt". *Temenos - Nordic Journal for the Study of Religion* 42 (1), 2006,42-43.

thought, use education and religious authority to advocate for empowerment and social change without departing from their theological commitments.[24]

This research explores the conceptual debates concerning the role of women in patriarchal religious movements and the interplay between global religious ideologies and local socio-political contexts. It examines how *Salafism* in Kenya is contextualized within transnational and African revivalist frameworks, focusing on how it shapes the religious and socio-political roles of women leaders in Muslim minority contexts. The study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of *Salafism* as a complex, adaptive, and deeply contested religious movement in Kenya, addressing doctrinal conservatism and social change.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study has employed an interdisciplinary theoretical framework drawing from scholarship on political Islam, *Salafi* ideology, gender studies (with emphasis on pious agency and Islamic feminism), and postcolonial theory. This combination enables a nuanced reading of Kenyan Muslim socio-political realities, the evolution of *Salafi* thought, and the religious agency of Muslim women particularly within educational and public religious spaces. At its core, the discussion on political Islam in Kenya revolves around the mobilization of Islamic principles, symbols, and identity to achieve political objectives, governance, and social justice.[25]

This concept has been interpreted in various ways, including as a theological revivalist movement, a socio-political resistance paradigm, or a combination of both.[26] In the Kenyan context, the expression of political Islam is deeply influenced by a legacy of colonial marginalization of Muslim communities, particularly in the coastal and northern frontier regions, and by post-independence political structures that have perpetuated economic and political exclusion.[27] The emergence of the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) in the 1990s, as noted by Bakari, epitomized the longstanding grievances of Muslims regarding discrimination in education, employment, and political representation.[28] Ndzovu further emphasizes that Muslim organizations have served as crucial vehicles for political participation within a system that has otherwise limited their influence, often leading to increased state surveillance and repression.[29] This complex interplay between religious identity and political activism situates Kenyan *Salafi* movements within a broader continuum of Muslim responses to systemic exclusion, highlighting their significance in the quest for social justice and representation.[30]

Salafism is often understood as both a transnational and localized movement within the broader spectrum of Islamic thought. At its core, *Salafism* promotes a reformist agenda that seeks to return to the practices and beliefs of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the early generations of Muslims,

[24] Ng'ayo, "Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism among Muslim women in Kenya," 150.
[25] John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[26] John O. Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994).
[27] Justin Willis, "Mombasa, the Swahili, and the Making of the Mijikenda," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26, no. 2 (1993): 241–266.
[28] Mohamed Bakari, "A Place at the Table: The Political Integration of Muslims in Kenya, 1963-2007." *Islamic Africa* 4, no. 1 (2013), 22.
[29] Hassan J. Ndzovu, "The Politicization of Muslim Organizations and the Future of Islamic-Oriented Politics in Kenya," *Islamic Africa* 3, no. 1 (2012): 25–53. DOI: 10.5192/21540993030125
[30] Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009),13.

known as the *salaf al-salih*.[31] This foundational goal underscores the movement's emphasis on authenticity and purity in the practice of Islam. However, it is essential to recognize that *Salafism* is not a monolithic ideology; instead, it encompasses a wide array of interpretations and practices. Within this framework, distinct currents have emerged, each with its own approach and emphasis. These include quietist *Salafism*, which prioritizes religious scholarship and personal piety without engaging in political activism; activist *Salafism*, which seeks to engage socially and politically to reform society; and jihadist *Salafism*, which advocates for the use of violence in pursuit of its goals.[32] This diversity highlights the dynamic nature of *Salafism* as it adapts to different contexts, whether they be local, national, or global. By understanding *Salafism* through this intricate lens, one can appreciate its complexities and the varying influences it exerts on contemporary Islamic discourse.

In Kenya, various currents of thought manifest in contrasting institutional roles. On one side, educational establishment like the Maahad Girls' Training Institute (Maahad GTI) represent quietist piety, focusing on religious learning and teacher training. Conversely, activist preachers address moral reform debates, governance issues, and advocate for greater Muslim representation. A small fringe has adopted militant interpretations influenced by regional insurgencies such as Al-Shabaab.[33] This typological framing helps to resist the common tendency of equating all *Salafi* activism with radicalism.

A critical analytical lens for understanding this context is Saba Mahmood's notion of pious agency. Mahmood challenges liberal feminist assumptions that agency is inherently expressed through resistance to patriarchal norms. Instead, she emphasizes the cultivation of religious discipline, ethical selfhood, and moral virtues, even within conservative religious frameworks.[34] This perspective is particularly relevant for Maahad GTI, where empowerment is achieved through the mastery of religious knowledge, taking on leadership roles in teaching, and actively participating in *da'wah* (proselytization), without necessarily rejecting traditional gender expectations.[35] Kenyan scholarship builds upon Mahmood's insights by exploring Islamic feminism, which considers how Muslim women navigate their religious identity, education, and public participation.[36] While patriarchal community structures and restrictive interpretations of sharia persist, women in institutions like Maahad GTI utilize religious legitimacy to engage in public discourse, assume community leadership roles, and conduct digital religious outreach.

The framework of Postcolonial Theory, when applied to the politics of Muslim identity, reveals how colonial rule shaped religious regulation in Africa.[37] In Kenya, the colonial government institutionalized religious differentiation by establishing *Kadhis* courts, which both acknowledged and

[31] Fathima Azmiya Badurdeen, *Study to Examine the Influence of Contemporary Islamic Ideologies in Kenya: Lamu and Tana River Counties*.UK Aid: REIVENT Programme. 2021, 18.; Østebø, Terje. "African Salafism: Religious Purity and the Politicization of Purity." *Islamic Africa* 6, no. 1–2 (2015): 2.

[32] Botha Anneli, "Political Socialization and Terrorist Radicalization Among Individuals Who Joined Al-Shabaab in Kenya." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37 (11): 2014, 916.

[33] Ng'ayo, "Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism among Muslim women in Kenya," 131.

[34] Mahmood Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. (2005).

[35] Ng'ayo, "Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism among Muslim women in Kenya," 129–156; Esha, F. Mwinyihaji. "Kenyan Muslim Women in Media and Politics: Fighting for Legitimacy." *Global Journal of Human Social Science, Sociology, Economics & Political Science*. 12 (9), (2012), 41.

[36] Gerard Clarke, "Faith Matters: Faith-Based Organisations, Civil Society and International Development," Journal of International Development 17, no. 6 (2005): 835–848.

[37] Kai, Kresse. "Muslim Politics in Postcolonial Kenya: Negotiating Knowledge on the Double-Periphery." Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) 15, suppl. S1 (2009): S76–S94. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2009.01543.x.

constrained Islamic legal authority. Following independence, subsequent governments maintained these structures, often exacerbating the marginalization of Muslim communities. The securitization of Muslim identities intensified after the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombing in Nairobi and continued under the global security measures implemented post-9/11. In this context, public expressions of Islamic piety, particularly among *Salafi* actors, are frequently met with suspicion. Women's religious leadership in such environments becomes doubly political: it not only challenges traditional gender norms within Muslim communities but also contests state narratives that portray visible Islam as a threat.

By interweaving elements of political Islam, *Salafi* ideology, pious agency, Islamic feminism, and postcolonial critiques, this framework offers a comprehensive lens for examining the activism of Kenyan *Salafi* women. It shifts the focus from security-centric narratives to highlight the agency, intellectual contributions, and socio-religious strategies of women navigating complex political and religious landscapes.

4. Methodology

This article adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating a qualitative literature review with primary data collection through in-depth interviews. Secondary sources were utilized to investigate *Salafism's* compatibility with various socio-political contexts in Africa, with a particular focus on Kenya. The qualitative aspect of the research involved conducting detailed interviews with, eight local *sheikhs*, eight former graduates and the founder of the Maahad Girls' Training Institute (GTI). These individuals were carefully selected due to their esteemed leadership roles and significant influence within their communities. Due to the sensitivity of the subject, the researcher sometimes avoided using the term *Salafi* and instead used the terms 'views' or 'thought.' The interviews provided valuable insights into the public participation of Muslim women within both *Salafi* and broader Islamic frameworks in Kenya.

The collected data were thematically analysed, guided by applicable theoretical frameworks. These theoretical lenses highlight the potential for Muslim women leaders to navigate and operate within religious constraints in order to instigate social change. By examining the dynamics of *Salafism*, this paper sheds light on its influence on socio-religious and political transformations in Kenya, particularly emphasizing the role of Maahad GTI in the empowerment of Muslim women through education and public engagement.

Salafism, characterized by a strict interpretation of Islam, has been a topic of significant debate concerning its impact on societal norms and individual rights in various contexts. In Kenya, where diverse interpretations of Islam coexist, understanding how *Salafism* interfaces with local realities becomes critical. This article not only contributes to the body of knowledge regarding the socio-political landscape of Islam in Kenya but also reinforces the importance of women's voices in these discussions. Through the narratives captured in the interviews, the paper illustrates the complex interplay between religion, gender, and social activism among Muslim women in Kenya. The findings provide evidence of the transformative role that education institutions like the Maahad GTI play, not just in facilitating knowledge acquisition but also in fostering a sense of agency among women, enabling them to engage actively in both community and political spheres.

5. Findings and Discussion

The research reveals that *Salafi* Muslim women in Kenya, particularly graduates of the Maahad Girls' Training Institute (Maahad GTI), operate in a complex socio-political environment shaped by historical marginalization, contemporary securitization, and evolving religious discourse. This marginalization, rooted in colonial policies that restricted Muslim participation in political and economic life, continues to influence the ways in which women navigate public and civic spaces.[38] Participants framed their activism not as a quest for partisan political power but as an exercise in moral citizenship a practice grounded in Islamic ethics yet directed toward community service, education, and moral reform.

The legacy of earlier Muslim political mobilizations, such as the emergence of the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) in the 1990s, had briefly created discursive opportunities for broader Muslim representation.[39] The promulgation of the 2010 Constitution, with its expanded Bill of Rights and provisions for religious freedom and devolution, was initially seen by many Muslims as a potential opening for greater civic and political participation.[40] However, the current climate is marked by heightened securitization, particularly following the global war on terror. Women recounted that their visibility as religious educators or public speakers sometimes attracted suspicion, especially when their *Salafi* affiliation was noted, reflecting the post-9/11 global trend in which Muslim identities particularly visibly religious ones are scrutinized through a security lens.[41]

Significantly, the study found that *Salafism* in the Kenyan context does not fit neatly into the militant stereotype often portrayed in the media. The strand operating through institutions like Maahad GTI is largely quietist and education-oriented, focusing on deep textual engagement with the Qur'an and Sunnah.[42] This emphasis on doctrinal purity and moral reform is not apolitical; rather, it embodies what scholars' term "activist quietism" a form of religious engagement that avoids direct confrontation with the state yet still shapes public life through moral discourse, community outreach, and *da'wah* activities.[43]

In this quietist framework, gendered agency takes on a distinctive form. Drawing on Saba Mahmood's concept of pious agency, women in this study did not define empowerment primarily as resistance to patriarchy but as the capacity to fulfil religious obligations with authority, precision, and social recognition.[44] Maahad GTI graduates often assumed leadership positions as Qur'an teachers, marriage counsellors, or presenters on Islamic radio programmes roles that enabled them to influence communal ethics from within the bounds of accepted religious norms. Although certain aspects of Islamic feminist thought such as re-reading sacred texts to affirm women's leadership potential were present, most participants distanced themselves from the feminist label due to its association with secular and Western agendas.[45]

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[38] John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 14-15.
[39] Bakari, "A Place at the Table: The Political Integration of Muslims in Kenya," 22-23.
[40] The Constitution of Kenya, 2010, *Laws of Kenya*. (Nairobi: Government Printer. Rev, 2022).
[41] David M. Anderson and Jacob McKnight, *Kenya at War: Al-Shabaab and Its Enemies in Eastern Africa*, African Affairs 114, no. 454 (2014): 10-20
[42] Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
[43] Badurdeen Fathima, *Study to Examine the Influence of Contemporary Islamic Ideologies in Kenya: Lamu and Tana River Counties*,33-38
[44] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 7-9.
[45] Ng'ayo, "Islamic feminism as an alternative strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism among Muslim women in Kenya,"137.

These negotiations unfolded against a postcolonial legal backdrop in which Islamic law, through the *Kadhis* courts, remains confined to personal and family matters.[46] While this arrangement provides a space for religious authority, it limits Muslim women's influence on broader governance and policy-making. Several participants also described encounters with security agencies such as questioning during travel or scrutiny of community activities which underscores the persistent framing of *Salafi* activism within counterterrorism narratives rather than as legitimate forms of social reform.[47]

Ultimately, the findings show that *Salafi* Muslim women in Kenya are not passive recipients of religious instruction but active shapers of their socio-religious environment. Through education, moral leadership, and strategic engagement with both local and digital publics, they are redefining the boundaries of women's participation in Islamic discourse. Their approach anchored in religious ethics yet attuned to the realities of marginalization and securitization suggests that *Salafism* in Kenya can serve as a vehicle for women's empowerment and civic participation, challenging the reductive portrayals that dominate both popular and academic narratives.

6. Conclusion

Salafi ideology has evolved into a significant global movement, with its most visible and controversial manifestations often linked to jihadist groups such as Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab across Africa. While these militant expressions dominate media and policy discourse, the broader spread of *Salafism* on the continent has been shaped by multiple, often nonviolent, factors. These include proselytization efforts, the return of graduates from Middle Eastern institutions, economic hardships that heighten receptivity to transnational Islamic funding, charismatic religious leaders, and Africa's geographical proximity to the Arabian Peninsula. Together, these dynamics have positioned Salafism as a transformative force whose influence extends across religious, social, political, and cultural spheres, prompting reconfigurations of social norms, gender roles, and modes of political engagement.

In Kenya, both colonial and postcolonial political experiences have deeply influenced Muslim engagement with national politics. Historical marginalization rooted in colonial neglect of Muslim-majority coastal regions and compounded by post-independence inequities spurred the growth of Islamic reform movements, particularly during the political liberalization of the 1990s. The advent of multiparty politics and the ratification of the 2010 Constitution opened new avenues for political expression. However, while *Salafism* in Kenya is frequently framed as synonymous with radicalism and political Islam, this study demonstrates a more layered reality. For many Kenyan *Salafi* especially those aligned with quietist traditions religious commitment centres on spiritual renewal, social transformation, and rigorous observance of Islamic teachings rather than political confrontation. Despite this diversity, scholarly engagement with *Salafism* in Kenya remains limited, partly due to security sensitivities and the risk of association with extremism. This reluctance has reinforced public misperceptions and perpetuated fear among educated Muslims, particularly in urban areas. Mainstream media and political rhetoric tend to depict *Salafism* primarily through the lens of extremism, obscuring the quietist, educational, and socially constructive strands within the movement.

[46] Tayob, Abdulkader. "Kadhis Courts in Kenya's Constitutional Review (1998–2010): A Changing Approach to Politics and State Among Kenyan Muslim Leaders." *Islamic Africa* 4, no. 1 (2013): 103–24.

[47] Anderson and McKnight Jacob, "Kenya at War", 10–20.

The Maahad Girls' Training Institute (Maahad GTI) offers a compelling counter-narrative. As a *Salafi*-oriented educational institution, it demonstrates how the ideology can be expressed through constructive, community-centred initiatives. Its female graduates, in particular, have emerged as pivotal agents of moral and social reform, combining religious scholarship with practical community engagement. They embody a quietist *Salafi* ethos that prizes personal piety, ethical living, and peaceful civic participation, while deliberately avoiding partisan political involvement. Personal narratives collected in this study illustrate how religious education at Maahad GTI equips women to navigate the intersections of identity, faith, and civic responsibility. These women leverage their training to challenge stereotypes, mentor younger generations, and expand the boundaries of women's participation in Islamic discourse without departing from doctrinal orthodoxy. In doing so, they disrupt dominant assumptions that equate women's empowerment solely with secular or Western feminist frameworks, instead situating agency within an Islamic paradigm of moral responsibility.

In this Kenyan context, *Salafism* when expressed through nonviolent, educational, and community-focused frameworks contributes to religious revival while reshaping gender norms and expanding spaces for women's leadership. This challenges the prevailing security-driven narrative that reduces *Salafism* to militancy, underscoring the need for more nuanced, evidence-based understandings of its multiple expressions. Far from being an imported ideology incompatible with local contexts, quietist *Salafism* as practiced in institutions like Maahad GTI demonstrates adaptability, cultural rootedness, and potential as a force for positive social transformation.

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